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Strategy, otters and sinister geraniums

The International Institute of Strategic Studies is a rather biblical organization in London which makes a living thinking about the world and issuing pessimistic thoughts on its condition.

The institute's 1980 survey is even gloomier than usual. It says that the chances of an East-West confrontation are growing because the Western alliance is all wrinkled up in arguments between Washington and everybody else and because the Russians have more horrible weapons than they used to have and are even nastier than usual.

The institute has a biblical quality about it because the yearly planet portraits it produces are taken as gospel. They are regarded as grand overviews based on careful scrutiny of all the facts.

This year the International Institute of Strategic Studies hasn't considered all the facts. The world isn't in its usual state of peril. The world has gone bats and the battiness works for our side.

If the institute had read the newspapers, it would know about all that astonishing CIA research lately revealed — fiddlings with a vast range of sci-fi possibilities from the use of house plants as spies in enemy offices to mind-altering with drugs, and training seals, otters and other clever animals to carry explosives to places inaccessible to humans.

While all of these wonders were coming to light,

the Supreme Court ruled that man-made bacteria that eat oil spills can be patented. You can, in other words, have legally exclusive rights to a living organism. God may not have known this, but the bacteria breeders do.

And science, bless its chilly heart, has discovered that, by the year 3180, the world's magnetic poles will have done a flipflop. Compasses which now point North will point South.

All of this holds great strategic promise for the free world. We could, for instance, cross-breed an otter with a nuclear warhead and patent the result so that the Israelis couldn't steal it

from us. The otter would then dive into Brezhnev's swimming pool, self-destruct and we win.

Or, if we're willing to wait 1,200 years, the one millionth Soviet division preparing to march into Afghanistan will glance at its compass and march, instead, into the Baltic Sea, in which case the Afghans win.

Some of the latest, dotty developments are controversial. A man who researches plant-human communications has already said he hopes the CIA will keep its black-gloved hands off geraniums. Theologians, editorial writers and other such big-picture folk are pondering the Supreme Court decision.

But the gloom of the strategic studies institute is misplaced. American genius now stands on the threshold of the nuclear otter and the sinister potted plant. And don't worry about the world turning itself upside down.

It already has.